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A call to resist the silencing of complexity by far-right politicians invoking Christian Values[1]

As a European with an academic background in political history, philosophy and economics, it is easy to recognise that I am living through one of those destabilising eras wherein the form of government to which we have become accustomed, no longer meets the needs of the societies it serves. We are living at a time where the nation state is under strain. Due to the globalisation of capital and the stateless opportunities for trading and influence offered by the internet, the extent to which national governments can exert political and economic control over those they govern is changing. Political engagement in the West is increasingly issue based and local, whilst economic, environmental, security and employment decisions need to be negotiated at a supra-national level. The advantage in this complexity is that a wider variety of people than ever before are able to participate in our societies. There is greater freedom to express and define ourselves in relation to others and it is more noticeable when we exclude *others* from our societies.[2] As an ordained theologian, but primarily as a follower of Christ, I am excited to see the emergence of such complexity. It is consonant with the glimpses of the kingdom of God offered by Jesus in parables and described by St Paul as a way of being in which 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28). Human beings do not, however, have a strong track record of handling complexity well. In Europe at present opinions are polarising as those who offer clear, simple ways to identify oneself against another and to define a solvable cause for an apparently self-evident problem attract the support of many who are struggling to negotiate their place in the new, more complex society that is developing. It is particularly disturbing, that so many of these polarizing leaders are claiming the defence of *Christian values* as the basis for their

[1] A version of this article entitled, 'A call to resist the colonisation of the term Christian by far right politicians, through prayer, lament, and making your voice heard.' has been submitted to the Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal for publication this winter, If it is accepted it will be available in December, here: https://www.scotland.anglican.org/who-we-are/vocation-and-ministry/sei/sei-journal/.

[2] In Britain, for example, we are beginning to see not only people from other nations and continents integrated into society, but the integration into the mainstream of those with special or additional needs and physical disabilities as evidenced by the televising of the *Paralympics* and the primetime screening of shows such as the *Undateables* and *The Last Leg*.

reactions against complexity.[3] We need, therefore, to examine, where this appeal to Christian values and (indirect) claim to be acting in the name of God derives from. To understand this we need to go back to the beginning.

Beginnings

All societies have their creation myths; in Babylon, the first city-state, the myth was told thus, 'Tiamat, "salt water, primal chaos," lay in primordial bliss with Aspu, "sweet water," "abyss". From their mingling waters precipitated a beginning' (Keller 2003, 977). As the Babylonian state became Imperial, creation by war superseded the tale of cosmic procreation. The Enuma Elish is a re-writing of Babylon's creation myth in which Tiamat is slaughtered by the heroic Marduk, conquering chaos and giving a new creation by war into a single hand who becomes Lord of the Universe (Keller 2003, 977–1021). Since the Enuma Elish served not just to commemorate the creative deed, but to justify therewith the political hegemony of the city-state of Babylon, we are not surprised to read its raw will to power. His heroic deed was based on a negotiation to end all negotiation:

[3] "Honourable House, One cannot renew an entire nation in secret. In my view, a contribution to the results we have achieved so far has been made by our open declaration that the age of liberal democracy is at an end. Liberal democracy is no longer able to protect people's dignity, provide freedom, guarantee physical security or maintain Christian culture. Some in Europe are still tinkering with it, because they believe that they can repair it, but they fail to understand that it is not the structure that is defective: the world has changed. Our response to this changed world, the Hungarian people's response, has been to replace the shipwreck of liberal democracy by building 21st-century Christian democracy. This guarantees human dignity, freedom and security, protects equality between men and women and the traditional family model, suppresses anti-Semitism, defends our Christian culture and offers our nation the chance of survival and growth. We are Christian democrats, and we want Christian democracy" (Orbán 2018a). "We see that many Euro-Atlantic countries have de facto gone down the path of the rejection of… Christian values. Moral principles are being denied… What could be a greater witness of the moral crisis of the human socium than the loss of the capacity for self-reproduction. But today practically all developed countries can no longer reproduce themselves. Without the values laid down in Christianity and other world religions, without the norms of ethics and morality formed in the course of millennia, people inevitably lose their human dignity. And we consider it natural and right to defend these values" (Putin 2013). President Trump defended what he described as America's spiritual bedrock in an impassioned speech to conservative voters in Washington on Friday, pledging to "stop all attacks on our Judeo-Christian values." Trump was the first sitting president to address the Values Voter Summit, a yearly symposium of socially conservative leaders and voters who aim "to preserve the bedrock values of traditional marriage, religious liberty, sanctity of life, and limited government that make our nation strong" (Jenkins 2017).

> If I am indeed to be your avenger, to vanquish Tiamat and to keep you alive, convene the assembly and proclaim my lot supreme […] May I through the utterance of my mouth determine destinies instead of you. Whatever I create shall remain unaltered. (Keller 2003, 2968)

This is the first known dominology myth. It has been suggested that the Elohist (writer of the Genesis 1 creation story) was writing a Hebrew version of this myth, deliberately subverting the dominology whilst the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon (Keller 2003, Chapter 6). "At the beginning of the Creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void and there was darkness, the breath of God vibrated on the face of the waters and God said, "Let there be […]"" (Rosenbaum & Silberman 1965, 2). The Elohist's creation narrative is about letting be… By the words of Elohim's mouth possibilities are given the opportunity to exist. As the breath of God vibrates over the waters of the tehom new possibilities emerge… Of the endless possibilities in the waters of the tehom, God "lets be", gives existence to… For the Elohist this was happening at the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth an ongoing process, not performed once and for all. Elohim's tone is closer to that of a would-be lover seducing possibilities from the tehom into being than that of a commander issuing decrees. It is a much more complex and gentle picture than we are used to and does not easily break down into binary oppositions. It is a creation narrative far better in keeping with that described in the whirlwind tale of Job and consonant with the God Jesus embodies who will not use force to get his own way but invites participation in a kingdom of endless new beginnings. It is the kind of beginning the first followers of Jesus would have recognized.[4]

Unfortunately, it is not the kind of beginning many Christians recognize today. Since the third and fourth centuries CE the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo has come to dominate the Christian imagination. In the patriarchal councils where the many emerging forms of Christianity were argued and tested, the conviction that God was omnipotent emerged. With that conviction in mind the Elohist's narrative became problematic. God is omnipotent, *He* could not, therefore, depend on anything but his own logos to create. So a two-step creation was proposed in which God first created the Tehom and then began the creation of the heavens and the earth. This

[4] I say recognised, not believed as it is important to remember that people of the first century understood the truth system of mythos as well as logos. They would not have attempted to read the creation story as an accurate or scientific account of what happened, but as a way to learn something about the God who holds all things in being. For an accessible yet scholarly account of this, read Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* especially the introduction and first two chapters.

eventually cohered into the creatio ex nihilo of Augustine that has dominated our thinking since the fourth century CE.

Creation ex nihilo is a doctrine of sheer power based on a negotiation to end all negotiations just as in the Enuma Elish. The Christian negotiation happened off-stage, however, in councils and treaties and by the gradual eclipsing of the second verse of Genesis — the silencing of the tehom. Without the complexity of the tehom, cosmogony is much easier to understand. God commands and it is done. No wonder the Roman Empire was willing to ally itself with this new monotheism. When people are ruled in the name of an omnipotent God, then their leaders will also be seen as omnipotent. So it has been for emperors, absolute monarchs, the governments that deposed them and their successors throughout the Western tradition of politics. It is to this dominology that leaders such as Trump, Putin and Orbán are appealing when they seek to defend *Christian* culture and values. In the face of complexity they are each trying to make the negotiation to end all negotiations.

Case Study

As a citizen of the European Union (for at least 100 or so more days) and someone who lived and studied in Hungary during Orbán's first term in power, I turn my attention to Orbán's bid for supremacy and wielding of *Christian values* in Hungary.

Orbán's first term in power coincided with that of Tony Blair in the UK and there were frequent comparisons made between the two. This is not surprising as both were lawyers, both drew ideals of community from life in Oxford colleges and both were unusually young to be Prime Minister. Both men also spoke of promoting Christian values and saw religion at the service of the state in building up communities and promoting the *common good*. As Tony Blair put it, "what is the idea of community but the national acknowledgement of our own interdependence? In truth faith is reason's ally… Religions help to make our communities, communities of values" (Chapman 2005, 20).

Chapman, however, notes the irony that "in Britain church membership and practise have halved in 40 years […]. Christianity has become a lifestyle choice rather than something that is simply the warp and weft of British society […]. Churches will no doubt continue to exist for their adherents for a long-time yet, *but it is impossible to recreate the Christian nation: the culture of Christianity has vanished*" (Chapman 2005, 21–22, *italics my own).* If this is the case in Britain, where Christianity is still available as a background to the public discourse, how much more impossible must it be to recreate the

Christian nation in Hungary, where the Christian discourse was suppressed under Communism? It does beg the question, what is Orbán trying to do?

We might begin to unpick the answer considering Orbán's reaction to losing power in the elections of 2002. Debreczeni József, an adviser to Orbán after his first rightward turn — and later his biographer states: "They say that power spoils good politicians". "With Orbán that wasn't the case. It was the loss of power that did that." During an intense one-and-a-half days after the election, Mr Debreczeni listened as Mr Orbán blamed his political demise on a partisan news media that needed to be reigned in. Mr Debreczeni said that Mr Orbán had drawn one conclusion: *"This democracy thing, where power can slip so quickly from you, was no good."* "And from that point on," Mr Debreczeni added, "he spent his time preparing so that if he ever won power again, he wouldn't lose it" (Kingsley 2018a). Jiri Pehe, a former Aide to Václav Havel, reflecting on this pattern in Central Europe more widely, said, "democracy proved to be a very difficult project for this generation of politicians to master" (Kingsley 2018a).

It is my assertion that the frustration felt by Orbán and others in the face of the complexity of life at the beginning of the 21st century, when the great metanarratives with which we have held back the chaos for so long are breaking down, is driving their will to power. It is driving their desire to end all negotiation and reign supreme. For this reason they reinvent themselves as defenders of a way of life that is under attack, a way of life that needs their defence, all the people have to do is allow them to have absolute power (Kingsley 2018b). For Orbán's narrative to be convincing, the life that is under attack must be a way of life that once existed in Hungary. The Hungarian parliament still displays the crown of St. Stephen (István I) who converted the Magyars to Christianity (in the bloodthirsty manner of Christendom) in order to unite the Roman and Byzantine churches in recognising his authority to rule. A *Christian* way of life is, therefore, part of the national narrative, the collective memory but because religion is a matter of practise (see Armstrong 2009, 110), not knowledge, Christianity is known only to a small minority who continued to worship, even under Soviet rule. Orbán is, therefore, free in Hungary, to offer an account of Christian values that will appeal to those who are struggling with complexity and wish to see some clear boundaries marked. The Christianity Orbán conjures is, therefore, inherently tehomophobic and resembles the views of rationalist fundamentalists[5] that call themselves *the Christian Right* in the USA. This is how Orbán is able to make statements such as, "Let us confidently declare that Christian democracy is not liberal […]. Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture […] Christian

[5] For a reasoned argument as to why the American Christian Right should be described as rationalist fundamentalist, see: Armstrong 2009, 163.

democracy is anti-immigration […]. Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept" (Orbán 2018b).

In contrast to Orbán's statement, I would like to offer this considered proposition of what a Christian politics at the beginning of the 21st century might look like, offered by Chapman in his critique of Blair's Britain. Chapman recognises the need for

> a Christian vision of society which does not necessarily require either notions of the common good, or the formation of Christian character through some kind of neo-Athenian theory of education but regards freedom and its expression as central to the Christian Gospel. (Chapman 2005, 83)

Recognizing that at the heart of pluralism, lies the solving of conflicts or at least the determination to learn how to live with them, Chapman finds inspiration for a Christian form of government the work of Figgis, who reminds us that

> whether, however, the doctrine of omnipotence be proclaimed in church or state, whether it take the form of monarchy by divine right or the sovereignty of the people, always and everywhere the doctrine is false; for whether or no men can form a logical theory to express the fact, the great fact at the root of all human society is that man is a person, a spiritual being; and that no power — not even a religious society — is absolute, but in the last resort his allegiance to his own conscience is final. (Figgis, 1914, 154–155)

Chapman's vision of a Christian form of State is one in which the role of the state is "to prevent the universal claims of any community, to prevent the right of any group to define the common good' and 'to ensure full participation of competing groups and to equalize the distribution of resources and power, which in turn requires a commitment to pluralism, that is the rights of others to exist as different" (Chapman 2005, 93–94). This would require 'thoroughgoing reforms of democratic accountability and participation" pointing "to the need for […] a reorientation to the periphery, where participation can begin to bite and life-shaping decisions can be made" (Chapman 2005, 94). Living with others and being in conflict implies that our group might just possibly be wrong, that we might have something to learn from another group. Current ethnic tensions in Europe suggest that as human beings, we are not always willing to concede that our group might be wrong. Chapman suggests that

> rather than fostering a new moral consensus, a healthy society will be one that promotes what Ralf Dahrendorf called a "creative chaos". Indeed the

> role of government might be better understood as ensuring creative communication between different participatory groups, rather than government seeing itself as some kind of an agency whose role is to set the moral agenda. (Chapman 2005, 97)

Critiquing the claims

Let us return for a moment to Orbán's (in)famous quote, cited on pages 29–30 with a critical eye. How many conversations are can be opened up by engaging with these few lines? Firstly, let us pause to consider, *Christian democracy*. I have already addressed some of the concerns I have with the use of this term. Firstly, each constituent word holds a great variety of meanings depending on the person with whom you are talking and the context that you are talking in. The two words together are resonant of the European Christian Democrat parties but appear to be describing a political system rather that a party affiliation. The question as to what a Christian democracy might look like, whether it is possible or even desirable could keep social scientists, philosophers, theologians, and political analysts in work for years. Here it is simply dumped with the weight of borrowed authority, as if it were an unproblematic concept.

Secondly, what does the statement *'Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture'* mean? If we accept that Christian democracy as a term, one acceptable reading of it is: a democracy shaped by the teachings of Christ and the people that follow them. Despite the fact that, throughout the centuries, there have been Christians who have colluded with nation states and their rulers to impose Christianity on others and build up their power, there have also always been those who held close to the truth that Christianity is not about imposing our will on others, but letting be and serving indiscriminately.[6] The Russian Orthodox, Metropolitan A. Bloom said,

> The Church must never speak from a position of strength. The Church ought to be, if you will, as powerless as God himself, who does not coerce, but who calls and unveils the beauty and the truth of things without imposing them. (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh 1980)

Christians are the churches and thus a follower of Christ must never speak from a position of authority. Looking directly to Jesus, we know that

[6] The Crusades, Inquisition and barbarous extension of Christianity under rulers such as István I cannot be denied. Concurrently we have held up determined pacifists as saints, including: Hippolytus of Rome; Tertullian; Gregory of Nyssa; St Francis; St. Maximilian & St Magnus.

"although Jesus was a rabbi, he was by all accounts no ordinary one. Jesus was in crucial respects a religious and cultural revolutionary. He taught that although God had revealed himself uniquely to the Jews, (John 4.22) Jewishness alone was no guarantee of favour with God (Matthew 8.10–12). He taught that the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24; Mark 13) and that worship of God would be centred in the heart, not in Jerusalem (John 4.21–24). He taught that a kind Samaritan or a repentant tax-collector was better than a pious but proud or heartless Pharisee. (Luke 10.29-37; 18.9–14) He invited women to be his disciples. (Luke 10.38–42) He granted healing to Gentiles (Matthew 15.21-28) and ate in the homes of outcasts (Luke 19.1–10)" (Boa, & Bowman 2006.).

The third statement, that *'Christian democracy is anti-immigration', is* one of the most outlandish. Accepting the reading of Christian Democracy in the paragraph above, the scriptures that Jesus was familiar with along with the Gospels and Epistles of the Christian Bible tell a very different story. I will allow them to speak for themselves. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13.2). "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25.35). "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Leviticus 19.33–34). "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15.7). "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him" (Exodus 22.21). "You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 24.22). God, as understood by Christians, has a real soft-spot for immigrants and no tolerance for those that wrong them.

The Christian family model requires some deeper thinking. What is *the* Christian family model? The Hebrew word for 'family' (mishpaha) is a fluid term blurring distinctions between family and tribe, and family and household. The family consists of those who are united by common blood and common dwelling-place. To found a family is to build a house (Nehemiah 7.4). The term for 'house', (beth), is also fluid. It may refer to the smallest family unit, the clan or even the entire nation (the 'house of Israel') (De Vaux 1961, 20–21). As Pederson put it, the family in ancient Israel 'extends as far as the feeling of unity makes itself felt' (Pederson 1926, 48). Therefore, in Jesus' cultural and linguistic inheritance: a family is what people think is a family.

Secondly, Jesus inaugurates God's reign, which the New Testament describes in family terms. Believers have the status of sons, not slaves (John 8.35). Jesus' followers are to address God as 'Father', not King. Paul uses family images to describe the Church, the earthly form of the heavenly

community. Christians are addressed or described as brothers in almost every paragraph of Paul's letters (Banks 1980, 53).[7] The eschatological community, God's family, resembles earthly families in its basic Father-son structure and in the family-type quality of its relationships. It is important to note that this structure should be understood as a parent-child, rather than specifically a father-son hierarchy. Moltmann has shown how we cannot see the Father purely as male. God-likeness is expressed in both sexes (Genesis 1.27). Where God's pity is spoken of, the metaphor of mother is used (Psalms 22.9; 123.2; Isaiah 42.14; 66.13). The Son proceeding from the Father has connotations of giving birth. We should see God as a 'Motherly Father' (Moltmann 1980, 51–56).

Next, we need to think about the purpose of the family in the biblical narratives. The biblical ethic focuses attention on what the family accomplishes by creating a particular type of community. It is more outward looking than many traditional 'defences' of the family.

Though not concerned primarily with the family, Genesis 1–2 have implications for the family. Children were given to the first man and woman not simply to complete their creation, to enable them to show parental love, but in the explicit context of creating a community which would fill the earth. "The nations all form one great family" (Vriezen 1962, 216). Israel itself is seen as a community bound together by family ties. The closeness of relationships in the smallest family unit, wherein what happens to the individual directly affects the whole and vice versa, therefore also characterizes the national family. The people look on themselves "as one living whole, a single animated mass of blood, flesh and bones, of which no member could be touched without all members suffering" (Robertson-Smith 1981, 28). The smallest family unit was to help create this wider family through procreation. The smallest family unit was also a means of bringing foreigners into the nation. Foreign women taken in battle could become members of the covenant community through marriage.[8] Residence in an Israelite home also brought alien slaves into the covenant.[9]

The purpose of marriage in the Hebrew Bible narratives makes Jesus' promise, that there will be no marrying in heaven, quite startling. Marriage ceases because, in the absence of death, there will be no need for procreation

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[7] See also Wolfhart Pannenberg,*Jesus- God and Man*, (London SCM, 1967) pp 229-30 and more generally Helen Oppenheimer, *Law and Love*, (Leighton Buzzard: Faith Press 1962) in which 'Gods family' is a central concept.

[8] See: Deuteronomy 21.10. I am aware that this notion of "taking women in battle" is problematic in myriad ways and needs to be resisted.

[9] See: Genesis 17.12. Equally I am not in favour of slavery. Both here and in 51, I am attempting to show that within the cultural understandings prevalent at the time of writing, there was still a concern to bring outsiders into "member" status within the family.

(Jewett 1975, 110–111). Equally, there will be no need for a multiplicity of parents since the children of the resurrection are God's children (Luke 20.34). The divine Motherly-Fatherhood has replaced human parentage (Marshall 1975, 742). Human families have dissolved into one family. Membership of this family no longer depends on belonging to the households of the people of God: it is accomplished by adoption through Christ.

Paul saw *singleness* as freeing people from the concerns of the world so that they could be more totally committed to the cause of the kingdom, which was a profound innovation in the context of the Jewish expectation that everyone should marry (1 Corinthians 7.32). The exclusive love of Christ in total abstinence becomes an objective form in which the eschatological kingdom is partially realised in this world (Schillebeeckx 1965, 131). Yet if singleness is made an option, so too must marriage which means, as Hauerwas notes, that the family is not something 'we do' because we are in the habit or it is necessary. Like the life of singleness, it is a vocation for creating a particular kind of community (Hauerwas 1981, 174). Entering marriage involves commitment to a vision, that entails, the human family acting as a foundational unit for the family of God by transmitting knowledge of God to the next generation and by practising the way of life and rituals inaugurated by Jesus.[10]

In summary, one Christian reading of *the Christian family model* would be: a household living together in a web of parent-child relationships in which, what happens to the individual directly affects the whole and where both singleness and marriage[11] are recognised as vocations to building a community reflecting the image of God's kingdom.

Resisting silencing

As the 21st century CE matures, we will continue to see competing models of political organisation and religious understanding deriving from our basic reaction to the tehom (depth, possibility, complexity, chaos). Those for whom depth/chaos is a monster to be slain, will continue to find ways to silence and exclude the other from their realm. This is the impulse we are witnessing in Trump's America, Putin's Russia, Orbán's Hungary, recently in Sweden and in the deeply divided Britain of Brexit.

[10] This section has thus far drawn heavily from: Moynagh 1986.

[11] Here marriage does not have to be heterosexual and for procreative purposes as the gender fluidity within the Godhead has already been noted, as has the need for procreation in the kingdom of God.

If the silencing is to be resisted; if we are to live and work creatively together, then we will need to learn how to communicate creatively at local levels, in social situations, at an organisational level and in the process for airing/resolving disputes. In order for this to happen followers of Jesus will need to work hand in hand with those practised in the arts of critiquing and shaping discourse. Thankfully people have been working at this both formally and informally for many years. Informally, most people learn over time how to resolve disputes or make enquiries of their neighbours without coming to blows. Formally communication theorists and identity theorists have been working on questions of how one person relates to themselves, another, and to society for more than a hundred years. Much of this work is currently done in Linguistics departments, Gender Studies departments and Social Science departments of universities around the world. It is disturbing, therefore that universities in Hungary find themselves under attack from Orbán's government and Gender Studies programmes in particular (See: Adam 2018; Day & Foster 2017). I therefore call on academics, in whatever discipline to help the followers of Jesus to reclaim the term Christian by critiquing and deconstructing its use, especially in the political realm. I also call on followers of Jesus to support academics in institutions under attack by resisting the suppression of learning, pluralities of discourse and suppression of complexity in our name.

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